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Culturally responsive leadership for multicultural education: The case of “Vision School” in Malaysia

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Abstract

The “Vision Schools” in Malaysia is a new concept that brought within its common premises the vernacular primary schools of Malays, Chinese, and Indians. They were established to foster racial integration among students by sharing of common facilities and jointly hosting school events. But the success of the ‘Vision school’ initiative was hampered for it lacked ‘culturally responsive’ leadership to make the transformation. The school heads needed adequate knowledge base and competence in leading and supporting multicultural schools for racial integration. A new professional development model that supports multicultural education may have to be evolved for the school heads.

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1. Introduction

The multiracial and multiethnic composition of the Malaysian population was a handover from the British rule of a number of countries in the South East Asian region namely Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and Brunei. The colonial rule over these countries lasted from the early part of the 19th century until and the first half of the 20th century. During their sovereignty, the colonial masters had brought the Indians and Chinese in large numbers especially to Malaya to serve their economic interests in the country. The exodus continued with others who came from the parent countries on their own free will for economic exploits in later years. When the British finally declared independence to Malaya in 1957 they made it possible to incorporate constitutional provisions that granted the immigrant people citizenry rights to live alongside the indigenous people namely Malays. They extended the constitutional order to Sabah and Sarawak as well when they declared independence to them in 1963 along with Singapore and Brunei. Although the confederation of Malaysia originally comprised Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, its representation diminished to Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak in the next two years. Hence, Malaysia was born as a nation of multiracial and multiethnic people. In the latest census the Malaysian population had reached 27.17 million, The indigenous Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak constituted 66.8 percent, Chinese 24.5 percent, Indians 7.4 percent, and others 1.3 percent (Statistics Department Malaysia, 2009).

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Historically, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians have tended to hold on to their own racial tradition and culture. The national politics as well evolved along race-based party lines. Over the years, except for the occasional social and conditional vocational intermingling, the society continued to grow as blocks of racial people. A racial riot in 1969 wedged the divide even further. Despite various government efforts to bring the people together, a unifying formula has been to-date elusive. The socioeconomic disparity among the races and government policies to address it, rivalry for political clout, social status, religious attachment and nativity are key factors that underpin the uncomfortable racial sentiments of the people in the country.

The government of Malaysia, since independence, has been formulating and implementing a number of policies to unite and harmonize the people of the different races. It has consistently resorted to education as a critical avenue to achieve its agenda. Early in the independence, in its effort to create a national education system, it endorsed Malay, the language of the indigenous people, as the national language that must be learned by all the people of the country; at the same time, it allowed the learning of Mandarin and Tamil, the vernacular languages of the Chinese and Indians respectively. In fact, it has allowed the vernacular school system of the British to thrive to-date at the primary level under the national education system. It made curricular changes for uniformity across all schools. Nevertheless, there appeared to be unattended forces in the system that worked against the government's objective of national integration.

In the 1990s, racial polarization became a typical scene in the institutions of higher education. Students in the universities and colleges tended to gravitate towards the members of their respective race and culture. Another strong indicator of the tendency towards racial identification and ethnocentrism was the diminishing number of student enrolment in the national primary schools and the increasing exodus of the Chinese and Tamil children to the Mandarin and Tamil primary schools respectively. Similar symptoms and other forms of manifestation of the racial and ethnic divide could also be observed among the adults in the social and vocational environment.

The adverse and anticlimactic development of the government's initiative to integrate and consolidate its population has drawn serious attention among the national leaders, policy makers, educationists, and social activists. The government adopted different policies to counter the negative racial and ethnic developments, and re-navigate them towards building a stronger Malaysia that would hail coexistence, solidarity, and harmony among its people. It even propagated a philosophy of 'One Malaysia' (*Satu Malaysia*) that was focused on the concepts of 'acceptance, nationalism, and social justice' for a more united Malaysia.

2. The "Vision School" concept

The vernacular schools had long been a suspect as a potential breeding ground for the antiracial sentiments among the students. In 1995, the Malaysian Ministry of Education came up with the idea of creating "Vision Schools" (*Sekolah Wawasan*) by which primary schools representing the major races of the population namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian and with the medium of instruction in their respective mother tongue were to be located within a common compound. While each school would manage and administer on its own as a separate entity, it would share common facilities such as the school cafeteria, courtyard, multi-purpose hall, library, and school field with the other two schools. Also, the three schools would jointly host their weekly events such as school assembly and co-curricular activities, and the annual school events such as the sports day, excellent award day, teachers' day, and prize giving day (Ministry of Education, 1995). The government earnestly believed that the new arrangement of the schools would provide the children of the different races and ethnicities with the social environment and opportunity to mingle and interact and eventually befriend each other. Thus, the Vision School concept was perceived as a seeding place for the growth of racial harmony and integration. Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1995-2000), the government established seven Vision Schools as pilot projects in different locations in the country (Ministry of Education, 2001).

But, has the Vision School been able to achieve its aspirations? Did the provision of a formalized common curriculum, sharing of the physical amenities and facilities, and joint participation and celebration of special events bring about the so desired meeting of the hearts and minds? Study shows that the Vision School concept was flawed in its implementation (Malakolunthu, 2009); hence, the government's theory was not really tested. However, it is the author's view that the Vision School was an attempt at multicultural education but turned out to be a simplistic model to achieve racial and ethnic integration and harmony. The policy should have extended to other areas of school education such as the curriculum, pedagogical methods, instructional materials and text books, and assessment rather than limiting it to the sharing of physical premises and organizing of joint events. The unique arrangement of the Vision School at best would bring about acquaintance and friendship among many of the

students but not the cultural insight and appreciation of other people. Certainly, acquaintance and friendship will have to be part of integration and harmony but they have to be complemented with a multicultural outlook and competence. Students have to be educated and nurtured into becoming multicultural individuals who know, understand, respect and value differences among people as the reality of life.

3. Culturally responsive leadership

Principals play a pivotal role in making changes and implementing improvement initiatives in schools and have to be adequately prepared for it. Of course, they have to have the relevant knowledge and skills in the areas of change or improvement that they are trying to bring about (Fullan, 2004; Malakolunthu, 2007). Thinking along the line of culturally responsive leadership, one cannot help wondering about the potential contribution that the school principals of the Vision Schools could have made to the implementation of the idea. The Vision School idea that the Malaysian government ventured into was an attempt to promote multiculturalism among the students, although inadequately conceptualized and executed. It could be argued that had the principals been appropriately educated on the true motive of the Vision Schools, and had they stayed steadfast with the provision of a culturally responsive leadership, the project would have produced more favourable results. In proffering culturally responsive leadership, the principals would have to keep the multicultural perspective at all times in their thinking and undertakings, just as the corporate leaders would of profit and loss, and military leaders of command and control. They would bear their decisions and actions such that they were attentive to cultural accommodation, realism, and implications of cross cultural learning in the context of the Malaysian socio-political environment.

The principals of the Vision Schools should have known that they were aiming at multicultural education and it is a comprehensive process that might be conducted at different levels and stages depending on the aspiration, understanding, and involvement of the leader. They might choose to stay either at the lower levels of multicultural education that focuses on merely talking about personalities and participating in different cultural celebrations and holidays; or, go beyond to making curricular and pedagogical changes and modifications that would engage the students to actively participate in the processes of decision making and solving social issues that would require examination and clarification of ethnic and cultural values; and, involving the students in debates and discourses surrounding the issues of social injustice and inequality that arise from the obsession of racial and ethnic differences (Banks & Banks, 2004; Baptiste, 2002; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). But, all of these would have been possible only if the school leaders were able to raise the consciousness of all the stakeholders and help internalize the accepted norms, principles, and goals of multiculturalism by committing them to the philosophy of multicultural education. At the same time, it could not be neglected that the context of the school's operation and extent of freedom of action for the school leaders have also to be weighed in.

The literature on multicultural education generally offers models of leadership on the assumption that all principals enjoy complete autonomy and authority for the running of a school. This, however, was not necessarily always the case. Malaysian education, especially at the school level is governed by a centralized system that is overseen and directed by the Ministry of Education. By design and stipulation, the school principals have to abide by the operational protocols. The curriculum, including co-curriculum, subject allocations, syllabuses and text books, and students' learning requirements are all fixed and pre-formatted. Even the pedagogical ideas and system of assessment are systemically controlled. There are certain social studies which could be approached along the principles of multicultural education. But, they are rendered for rote learning and assessed for reproduction of memorized materials. As it seems, the principals are empowered to act as site managers only and their leadership is wanted in a relational sense with the staff, and for the maintenance of the school building and premises. Under such circumstances they would not want to experiment with any multicultural education ideas of their own. It would only be possible when the practice of multicultural education and culturally responsive leadership are endorsed and encouraged by the government. Nevertheless, the study of multiculturalism and the practice of culturally responsive leadership will always be an advantage to all principals regardless of the school system to which they belong.

The tide of change is coming. More and more of the schools in Malaysia are beginning to have students of different races and ethnicity. The national schools that are run with the medium of instruction in Malay, which is the national language, generally have mixed students. The vernacular schools with the medium of instruction in Mandarin and Tamil are also beginning to enrol students from other ethnic groups. Also, because of the migratory population from all over the world for reasons of administrative office, vocation, business and others, foreign students are enrolling in local schools. Another form of school facing the need for multicultural education is the international schools, which number is on the increase in the country. This is indisputably a global phenomenon and

the need for multicultural education and culturally responsive leadership cannot be underrated (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Gerin-Lajoie, 2008; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999).

4. Method

This study which is exploratory in nature was conducted using the qualitative case study method that allowed deep peering into the heart of the issues surrounding the practice of multicultural education, the role of principals, and the contextual factors that influenced their performance in promoting culturally responsive teaching and learning. This approach was also adopted for it was intensive, provided holistic description, and allowed space for the exploration of the 'Vision School' within its real-life context (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 2001).

Out of the eight Vision Schools in peninsular Malaysia, Lotus Park Vision School was selected as the research site. It was selected for it has successfully managed to house all three vernacular (Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil) schools in one compound and was also reputed as one of the successful Vision School in the country.

The data for this study were collected through multiple interviews, direct and participant observation, and document analysis. A total of 21 semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. The open-ended interviews, based on a portfolio of semi-structured questions designed to probe into the leadership functions and processes was helpful in eliciting more information from the subjects. All the formal interviews were audio tape-recorded, while the informal conversations were written down in a personal note book during and after the conversations/meetings with the respondents.

Observations of selected events, programs, and projects were recorded as field notes. Valuable insights captured during the observations were written in the form of memos. Various official documents and Ministry of Education circulars related to Vision School policies and procedures were studied and analyzed.

Since the headmasters were the main focus of this study, intensive interviews were conducted with the heads of all three vernacular schools at the Lotus Park Vision School campus. The actual interviews for the headmasters were very much organized around the major research questions and a number of sub-questions. In most instances, the questions for the interviews were developed spontaneously based upon the responses given by the headmasters. It was a process of continuous creation and evolution of questions specific to the contexts (Neuman, 2006; Yin, 1994). For triangulation purposes interviews were also conducted with teachers in the vision schools to learn about their perspectives on Vision Schools and the support provided by the school heads. A total of 17 teachers from the three primary schools housed in the Lotus Park Vision School participated in the interviews.

Both direct and participant observations were conducted for this study. The purpose of the observations was to look for certain clues, signs, and practices that might indicate multicultural teaching-learning climate in the schools. For example, the relationship between and among the three headmasters, teachers and students of the three schools during various functions, meetings, and events were focused during the observation. Attention was also paid to the degree to which various cultural and ethnic elements were highlighted and celebrated during the school activities and functions. In addition, the various staff development activities with regard to the practice of multicultural education and how it contributed to developing teachers' competencies in this area were also noted.

Apart from conducting interviews and observations at the schools, documents related to Vision School policy and concept papers from the schools and the Ministry of Education, Malaysia were also collected. The school documents collected include school magazines, special reports on school profiles, reports on school activities, minutes of the various subject panel meetings and staff meetings, some background information on the students attending the schools, history of the school, and the principals' biographical information, work experience, academic and professional backgrounds, and their professional duties at school. Policy documents from the ministry include the concept paper on Vision School.

5. Analysis of data

The data gathered from multiple sources were analyzed using the constant comparative method that involve coding and comparing of data and categorizing according to emergent themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The analysis of data from the Lotus Park Vision School indicated that the commencement of the practice of 'racial integration' as expected by the Ministry of Education was far from happening for the school leadership was not well prepared for this new venture. The 'constant comparative' analysis of data from multiple sources and the cross-case analysis provided evidence that there was little sign of multicultural or cross cultural education practices. The final level analytic coding revealed that all the three school heads had unclear vision of the "Vision School" policy,

poorly planned multicultural activities and projects, and lacked competency in the area of multiculturalism.

5.1. Unclear vision of the 'Vision School'

The three heads of the three elementary schools in the Lotus Park Vision School understood the concept of vision school as it had been stated in the Vision School Report by the Ministry of Education. All three heads repeatedly stated that they shared the field, the auditorium, and the school canteen/cafeteria. According to them, sharing of these facilities would provide the space and opportunity to students from the three different cultural backgrounds to interact with each other. This fact was clearly emphasized in one interview where one of the headmasters, Mr. Azizi said:

Sharing of the canteen is a great idea for encouraging integration among students of different culture. I see students from the Tamil, Chinese, and the Malay medium schools are given the opportunity to freely mix around and have their meals together under one roof. I think this a great opportunity to interact and have fun together.

Another headmaster, Mr. Loong added that the common school field they all shared also provided their students the opportunity to play together and become friends. According to him:

After school hours, students stay behind for co-curricular activities such as games and uniform units. During such activities, students may get a chance to play and interact with each other. We conduct our annual sports day together. This is another avenue for our children to compete together and feel the oneness.

This point was reiterated by the third headmaster Mr. Veloo who was very positive that the Vision schools concept was excellent for it provided an avenue and created a platform for interaction of students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. He reiterated this point by adding that:

This Vision School is a great avenue for students from different ethnic groups to interact and share the facilities. Hopefully, by sharing the various facilities and by mingling around together, the children from the three schools will be able to become friends.

From the above mentioned quotes, it was clear that the headmasters strongly believed that the Vision School would definitely help students mix around, especially during the recess time at the cafeteria and the after-school activities and sports day event and, therefore, they should become integrated! However, the headmasters' views of sharing, mixing-around, and becoming integrated sounded shallow and unfounded for a number of reasons. Firstly, they seemed to be associating racial integration with student interaction and playing together. In their explanation they did not seem to say anything deeper than this. It was again and again 'mixing around,' 'interacting with each other,' and 'playing together.' Secondly, they seemed to be operating under the assumption that by merely being in the same compound, students would be able to interact and integrate. This implied that there was a lack of understanding among the headmasters with regard to the intensity of the concept of racial integration and multiculturalism. Thirdly, they were not able to explain in concrete terms the different strategies or action plans that would lead to increased student interaction and racial integration.

While the headmasters were quite positive about the Vision School concept and its application, it was unclear to what extent this was practiced in the Lotus Park Vision School. From my interaction with the teachers, students, and my observations during the recess time in the cafeteria, lunch hours, and during co-curricular activities, I discovered that students did interact but it was very much limited to students from their own school. Sometimes, I was told by teachers who were on-duty at the cafeteria that students from different schools rarely sat together to have their meals and interact. According to one teacher on-duty at the cafeteria:

If at all you find some students from the different medium schools interacting, most probably they must be from the same neighbourhood or travelling by the same school bus. That is the basis for their interaction. Otherwise students from these three schools very much stick to their friends from their own school and tend to keep away from the students from the other schools.

This was confirmed by my personal observation as well as the interviews with some other teachers. Students too were on the affirmative with regard to this point.

5.2. *Poorly planned activities and projects*

During interviews with the headmasters with regard to various practices and processes that had been planned and implemented for multicultural education, I heard more about the celebration of the various religious and ethnic festivals, and school-based National Day, Teachers' Day celebrations, School annual sports day, and so forth, as the major events for bringing students from the three different schools together. There was no indication of any other efforts related to curriculum and instructional practices that would lead towards multicultural education. For instance, Mr. Veloo was excited to share about the *Pongal Day* (Tamil harvest festival) celebrations of his Tamil school and how they distributed the cooked sweet rice to students from the other two schools. According to him:

Last year's *Pongal Day* celebration was a great experience. Our students had a great time and we were able to invite some students from the Malay and the Chinese schools to participate. Those who attended had a chance to witness our students' cultural performances as well.

In answering questions related to practices and processes that might exhibit multicultural education, the headmaster of the Chinese medium school Mr. Loong narrated about his school's effort in bringing the lion dance troupe to the school during the Chinese New Year celebrations to entertain all students from all three schools in the compound. For him it was a great success because,

Almost every student in the whole Vision school compound witnessed the lion dance. It was really nice to see the children from all three schools together enjoying the Chinese New Year function hosted by our school. To me it was a contribution towards bringing children of various backgrounds together and it builds racial harmony.

The responses from the headmasters, in general, indicated that they seemed to possess a superficial understanding about multicultural education and the practices and processes involved in its implementation. For them multicultural education referred to the celebration of festivities and public events. This seemed to be an additive approach to multicultural education and was insufficient in bringing about real transformation in students (Banks & Banks, 2004). It was just another activity and did not possess lasting effects on the students' thinking about race relations and intercultural understanding.

The headmasters' explanations also revealed that they were operating under certain misconceptions about the processes involved in multicultural education. To them the construction of the physical aspects of the school seemed to be important rather than modifying the cultural elements that might institutionalize application and practice of multicultural education for cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. Since the headmasters operate under such simplistic understanding about multicultural education for racial integration, it was hard to expect them to create new curriculum and co-curriculum projects that would enhance racial integration or provide any specific instructional support to their teachers in practicing effective multicultural education.

5.3. *Lack of competency in the area of multiculturalism*

Among various reasons, the lack of in-depth knowledge and skills of the headmasters and teachers appeared to be a crucial factor influencing the unsuccessful outcome of multicultural education in the Vision School under study. The principals portrayed superficial understanding of the concept of multiculturalism and were not sure about its underpinning philosophy and the various stages involved in the process of emancipating children from the feelings of ethnocentrism to respecting and accepting diversity.

A number of reasons could account for the lack of competence on the part of the headmasters in performing as expected by the Vision School concept. The shoddy performance of the principals could be attributed to the absence of professional development initiatives organized or provided for them by the higher authorities such as the ministry

of Education or the State Department of Education. Mr. Azizi, Mr. Veloo, and Mr. Loong said they were not offered any special coursework where they were taught and inducted into the practice of multiculturalism. As Mr. Azizi admitted:

Just before I was posted here as the headmaster, I was told briefly about the Vision School concept in general and some information about the administration and operations of the three schools as separate identities. I was also told that some of the events will be done together and try to cooperate with each other.

This point was reaffirmed by Mr. Veloo's statement as given below:

When I was appointed as the head of one of the schools in the Vision School, I was called up by the State Department of Education personnel officer and was explained about the nature and *modus operandi* of the Vision School system and was asked to work together with the other two heads and help each other to make it a success. While I was told about the concept in general, there were no specific guidelines as where to focus and what kind of changes to bring about in terms of curriculum and teaching.

From the above statements of the headmasters it was clear that there was no clear cut direction and guidance for the organization and management of multicultural education. Furthermore, they were not told about the principles underlying the Vision School and how they might differ from other regular schools. Therefore, the heads were doing the bare minimum with very little understanding with regard to the Vision School.

6. Discussion of findings

This study on the Lotus Park Vision School clearly highlighted the shortfalls in the preparation of the school principals apart from a number of other inadequacies in the Vision School policy implementation processes. The school community commencing from the policy makers and principals and teachers lacked a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the Vision School (Malakolunthu, 2009). A great deal of sensitivity would be involved in the transformation to multiculturalism which was not properly weighed in. The principals with the most important leadership role were able to access only skeletal information from the Ministry of Education that did not have the necessary specifics to guide their approach. An obvious panorama of views and comments by the principals in the study revealed that they were struck by the bureaucratic protocol of a centralized government system and dared not attempt at changes in their administration, instructional practices, and community relationship for fear of repercussion. There was no show of leadership by any one of them.

Objectively, the principals were not trained on relevant competencies to manage and lead a Vision School. The implementation of the Vision School shows that such a set of competencies were never identified. The principals, naturally, behaved as principals of any other regular schools only recognizing a physical difference in their environment. They did not have the right kind of outlook nor mind-set for the purpose of the Vision School; they did not have the power or autonomy to act on their own; they did not know how to make educational sense of all the approved activities under the Vision School protocol; and, they were indeed concerned about the cultural sensitivities they might stir up by unwittingly crossing lines. Obviously, they would have been better off, and contributed more effectively, had they been adequately prepared and guided on the vision of the Vision School in the long term, fundamentals of organizational redesign, principles of human resource development, a model for leading a transformational change, and strategies of building community relationship, and on the tactics of creating a supportive environment for the practice of culturally responsive teaching (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999). They were enthusiastic about the idea of the Vision School and advocated its aims but felt more inhibited than motivated to act on them.

7. Conclusion

Culturally responsive education is a reform movement that requires changes in the organizational policy, structure, and culture of educational institutions. And, this means that principals have to possess the necessary competencies and knowledge base required for restructuring and realigning the school organization that would

support a culturally responsive teaching-learning agenda. Leaders of multicultural schools, or schools aiming for multicultural education, should value diversity by articulating a culturally proficient vision for the site, assess the culture of the site, manage the dynamics of difference by providing training and support systems for conflict resolution, institutionalize cultural knowledge by modelling and monitoring school-wide and classroom practices, and adapt to diversity by assessing and changing current practices. These aspects project a new sense of professional rationalization and justification for the functionality of principals in schools.

Apart from the normal leadership qualities and capabilities, and management practices the principals now will have to acquire other competencies such as redesigning organizational dynamics, managing change, and handling of human resources. It may be argued that the principals are already handling such responsibilities. However, the question is, “How rigorously and appropriately are these competencies practiced, tested, and experienced in the context of multicultural education?” Perhaps, a new curricular model that supports multicultural education, which would be an inherent requirement of the future, may have to be evolved for the professional development of school principals that incorporates elements of aim and philosophy of education, educational leadership, cognition and culture, curriculum and instruction, school context, human resource management, teacher professional development, change management, and policy process and governance. No analytical arguments have been made for the inclusion of these elements at this point in time, but intuitively they make sense in view of the Malaysian Vision School experience.

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